

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

## Review of *The Animal Question in Deconstruction*

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Lynn Turner's research focuses on the significance of species and sexual difference in culture and philosophy and her current work is especially concerned with the relationship between human and non-human animals. *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* is an exploration of this relationship in eleven essays, eight of which are new, two previously-published (in Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* [(2003)] and Kelly Oliver's *Technologies of Life and Death: From Cloning to Capital Punishment* [(2013b)], ), and one of which appears for the first time in English ('Un Réfugié' by Hélène Cixous, initially published in *L'Amour du loup et autres remords* in 2003). Turner states the anthology's purpose with admirable precision: "to take Jacques Derrida seriously when he says that he had always been thinking about the company of animals and that deconstruction has never limited itself to language, still less 'human' language" (2013c, p.2). She notes Derrida's principal work on the animal question, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (a 1997 lecture published in English in 2008), and the recently-translated *The Beast and the Sovereign* (lectures from 2001 to 2003, published in English in two volumes in 2009 and 2011), but aspires to include Derrida's previous work and also "to bring Cixous's thinking on animals to greater attention" (2013c, p.4). These varied aims are rather ambitious for such a slim volume and the result is that it is lacking in focus – though the variety in style and substance of contributions need not be prejudicial.

The relationship between literary theory and moral philosophy is well-documented and was characterised as antagonistic until the 'ethical turn' in criticism in the late eighties – prompted in part by the posthumous revelation that Paul de Man, a popular public intellectual and personal friend of Derrida, had collaborated with the Nazis in occupied Belgium. Derrida was at the centre of the storm of accusations and counter-accusa-

tions that followed, but a positive consequence of the vitriolic exchanges was an increase in his interrogation of ethical issues, a theme which had already begun with his papers on Emmanuel Levinas, the law, and apartheid. Derrida's publications in the nineties engaged with a large number of religious, political, and moral questions, from authenticity and hospitality to Marxism and the animal question, a question which he approached in terms of the hyperbolic responsibility of the self for the absolute other. Despite the claims of detractors to the contrary, I have always found a practical aspect to Derrida's ethical writings, notwithstanding their often complex, opaque, and elusive nature. There is at least one very clear point which emerges from *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, for example: "rather than 'The Animal' or 'Animal Life' there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living" (2008, 31). In other words, before one starts theorizing about the relation between human and non-human, one had better recognize not only (i) that the opposition human-animal is not itself clear-cut, but that (ii) the non-human side of this opposition is far from homogenous and that an ethics which fails to recognise this heterogeneity will be flawed from the start.

Unfortunately, this practical application is often absent in Turner's collection. Cixous' 'A Refugee' is all-too-brief, but admits of being read as both a literary work and a work of philosophy. As a prose poem, its formal richness and essential ambiguity reward repeated readings; as a short treatise, it offers a demonstration of not only how much like human beings animals are, but how much like animals human beings are. Cixous succeeds in this duality to the extent that the literary equivocation augments rather than detracts from the philosophical import. Many of the essays that follow are neither poetically satisfying nor philosophically deep, and several concentrate on

what amounts to little more than word-play. As such, the anthology is at its weakest where the focus is on a single species – swans, lions, earwigs, elephants, wolves, moles (twice), and worms – and attempts to load the animal subject with as much philosophical significance as possible are often presented in lieu of sustained, or at times even coherent, argument. Opacity is not necessarily an indication of profundity.

The apparent anomaly in this regard is Laurent Milesi's 'Sponge Inc', which offers an enlightening discussion of Derrida's *Signsponge* (a 1975 lecture first published in English in 1984) in the context of the lengthy and heated debate between Derrida and John Searle – one of deconstruction's most vituperative opponents. Milesi's exegesis of Derrida's analysis of the link between author and text is fascinating in itself, but also offers a fresh perspective on deconstructive criticism. His contribution has little if anything to do with the phylum Porifera and everything to do with the porous cleaning tool which absorbs fluids, however, so it is not in fact an exception to my observation above. The essays are at their strongest when they avoid focus on a single species in favour of addressing the animal question or a specific facet of that question. Stephen Morton's 'Troubling Resemblances, Anthropological Machines and the Fear of Wild Animals: Following Derrida after Agamben' is a paradigmatic example. Morton tackles the question of "how Derrida's readings of Agamben, Defoe and Heidegger in *The Beast and the Sovereign* can be seen to disclose the political implications of animals for understanding modern formations of sovereignty" (2013a, p.107). His style is accessible and precise and his exegesis explains Derrida's "somewhat fragmentary account" (p.121) in terms of colonialism and post-colonialism. Cixous' essay is about her cat, and Milesi's contains plenty of word-play, but they nonetheless offer – like Morton's – answers

to the questions they raise. Answers are largely absent elsewhere in the collection and it thus falls prey to exactly those accusations levelled at deconstructive criticism by Searle and others: targeting naive rather than sophisticated viewpoints, evincing a reluctance to commit to choices between options, employing unnecessary neologisms, and exerting a psychological rather than logical appeal. This is a great shame as Derrida has already shown that deconstruction has much to offer animal ethics in particular and moral philosophy in general.

### References

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